

*It was eighty years ago that Abraham Lincoln was assassinated.*

## DEATH IN FORD'S THEATER

By PAUL WIEGLER

### I

**O**N Monday, April 3, 1865, Negro troops of the Union army under General Weitzel were the first to enter Richmond, Virginia, the capital of the Southern states. General Ulysses Grant reported from Wilson, Virginia, that he would continue to pursue the remainders of Lee's army, whom his cavalry was following closely, as long as there was any point in doing so. On the following noon, the news spread in Washington. Everywhere the Stars and Stripes were raised, and the population jubilated. From the balcony of the White House, Seward, the Secretary of State, made a speech. The crowd dispersed with "stentorian" cheers for the President—who had left for the front—and the American Union. On April 9, Lee capitulated with 25,000 men.

President Abraham Lincoln had left Washington with his wife Mary to visit the victorious army on the Potomac River and to have a rest. He enjoyed a popularity in the North as no one ever before him. The descendant of Pennsylvanian Quakers, the grandson of a farmer in Kentucky killed by Indian bullets, the backwoodsman born in a log cabin, the raftsmen, shop assistant, sharpshooter, postmaster, district rider, and small-town lawyer always remained the melancholy giant. The coarse skin of his face was wrinkled, his gray eyes with the dark circles around them stared. His hard jaw and thin neck with the prominent Adam's apple were now covered by a black, white-streaked beard. His clothes hung loosely on his lanky body; and the uncomfortable new tailcoat, the top hat, and the gold-knobbed walking stick merely looked ridiculous on "old Abe Lincoln." Yet the fire which burned in him when he spoke swept the Americans off their feet. For the first time he felt in his profound seriousness that happier days were approaching. In Richmond he stepped ashore and strolled through the town. The Negroes looked upon him as their master and their savior. They knelt before him as their messiah with cries of hallelujah or they gaped at his uncommon height. It was a sultry day. The roads were full of dust. Lincoln fanned himself, his hat in his hand, sweat running down his face. To Admiral Porter, who accompanied him, it seemed as if he would be glad to give his presidency for a glass of water.

The President returned to Washington. With him was Senator Sumner, whose hatred

for the Southern states continued unabated like that of many others, and who would not hear of the emancipation of the Negroes. Lincoln read out some lines from *Macbeth* from a volume of Shakespeare he carried with him: "Duncan is in his grave; After life's fitful fever he sleeps well; Treason has done his worst: nor steel, nor poison, Malice domestic, foreign levy, nothing, Can touch him further." Lincoln spoke as if in premonition of his fate. Sadness had overcome him again until he shook it off with a wisecrack.

On the evening of April 11 he had invited some political friends. "Important principles," he said, "should, and must remain inflexible. In the present situation it may perhaps become my duty to make a new proclamation to the people of the South. I am considering this now and shall indeed not hesitate when I am convinced that the action is correct." He had dreamed of a voyage on a curiously built vessel to an undistinguishable coast. Before landing, he had awoken. "I always had this dream," he added, "before some special event, before a victory like Antietam, before Stone River, before Gettysburg, and before Vicksburg." General Grant did not like this list. "Stone River," he muttered, "was hardly much of a battle, much less a victory." Then the problems of the day were discussed.

On April 14 there was a meeting of the cabinet. Seward was missing; he had fallen out of his carriage and was confined to his bed. Lincoln, who welcomed the fact that Congress had been sent home, declared he would not tolerate any revenge being taken on the rebels. None of them, not even the worst, was to be hanged. "Enough men," he said, "have been sacrificed. We must wipe out our indignation if we expect unity and collaboration. Among some of our good friends there is too strong a desire to interfere in the affairs of the Southern states, to play the master, and not to treat the population as fellow citizens. They have too little respect for their rights. We must begin at once to work for peace." That is how the man spoke whom his opponents had been threatening for years in letters, and whose capture and assassination had already twice been planned by secret societies of conspirators. He no longer paid any attention to threatening letters. They were a regular dosage in his mail. Attempted assassinations were not, he said, an American crime. And even a bulletproof vest or a bodyguard would not be

able to protect him. "There are a thousand methods of getting at someone you want to kill."

In the afternoon he went for a drive with Mary. In the evening he was supposed to appear at a performance in Ford's Theater. At the gate of the White House he met some friends from Illinois and got into an interminable conversation with them. He read them funny stories till Mary had to remind him of the time. They had to go to the theater, without Grant and his wife, who had sent their excuses. General Grant had recently had a row with Mary and was sulking. The President and his wife took along a Miss Harris and her stepbrother, Major Rathburn.

## II

The actor John Wilkes Booth was the third son of the English tragedian Junius Brutus Booth. The eldest of his brothers, who had inherited the Roman names of his father, was just due to appear on the stage in Cincinnati. His second one was Edwin, the Hamlet of New York. John Wilkes was a definitely good-looking young man of twenty-three, tall and slim, with broad shoulders and a narrow waist, with fiery eyes and a pale face with a black moustache: a woman's idol, half Endymion, half Antinous. He was less talented than famed Edwin and had not got beyond gallant parts in which he was aided by his looks. He was considered a master at fencing, boxing, and pistol shooting. An actress of the Olympic Theater was his mistress. Once he shot at her. Leaving the stage, he made money in speculation, especially in oil. But a morbid urge to acquire romantic immortality lived on in his actor's soul. The previous winter he had played Mark Antony to Edwin's Julius Caesar in New York. In his speech at the forum he improvised an insertion with rolling pathos, the words "*Sic semper tyrannis!*" ("Thus one should always deal with tyrants!") That is not in Shakespeare; it was supposed to be the signal with which Brutus struck with his dagger, and it is the motto on Virginia's coat of arms. In the audience someone cried "Fire!" and a panic emptied the house. Fires broke out in sixteen New York theaters and hotels simultaneously. The words served as a signal for a conspiracy in which John Wilkes Booth was initiated.

To a friend who offered him a partnership in a coal firm he replied that he had to go to Washington. He had some business there. "That is a curious place for oil speculations," his friend laughed. On April 11 John Wilkes Booth left New York. He was carrying on him a marked bullet, he boasted, intended for the President. At the inauguration ball in Washington he was said to have observed Lincoln with a devilish expression, to have muttered darkly to himself and clenched his

fists. Because of his secessionist sympathies he had quarreled with Edwin, who was a loyal Unionist and had saved Lincoln's son Robert in Jersey City from slipping and falling under the wheels of a moving train.

On Thursday, April 13, John Wilkes Booth asked Mr. Hess, the Treasurer of Grover's Theater in Washington, whether he would illuminate the theater in the evening. "On Friday," replied Mr. Hess. "Good," said Booth, "why don't you put on an exciting new play on Friday and invite the President and other high officials? It would be a regular furore." On the morning of 14th he heard at the box office of Ford's Theater that Lincoln and Grant were to honor that evening's performance of the English comedy *Our Cousin from America* by their presence. At noon Booth appeared at a livery stable behind the National Hotel, where he hired a fast horse. At four o'clock the bookkeeper of the hotel handed him two visiting cards left by persons of suspicious appearance. He wrote at the desk, so absent-minded that he asked the bookkeeper what year it was.

At six o'clock, smartly dressed, Booth promenade down Pennsylvania Avenue. At half past seven he had a glass of brandy in the restaurant next to Ford's Theater. He entered the theater and crept about in it. After half past eight he led his horse by the reins to the front of the theater, entrusting it to the stage carpenter Spangler. He walked up the stairs to the dress circle toward that side where Lincoln—received in the middle of the first act by a flourish sounded by the orchestra—was sitting. The passage along the wall was crowded, and Booth had to elbow his way through to the President's box. Previously, at eight o'clock, he had drilled a peephole through the inner door of the box. Now, during the third act, he slunk through the outer door and barred it with a small board. He squinted through the crack and flung open the inner door. He approached the President and discharged his pistol at the back of the President's head. Lincoln collapsed, seriously wounded. Booth scrambled over the ramp of the box onto the stage, stumbled as his spur got caught in the national flag, cried out as in New York: "*Sic semper tyrannis!*", brandished a dagger, and escaped, while actors and audience alike looked on paralyzed. Soldiers were fetched. Lincoln, bleeding and unconscious, was carried to a private house opposite the theater and lived on, breathing heavily, until seven in the morning. The assassin's spur and hat were found.

At about the time of the crime, a person demanded entrance to the house inhabited by the sick Secretary of State Seward, purporting to bring the medicine prescribed by the doctor. The stranger ran to the third floor, met Seward's son Frederick, and hit him over the head. Then he rushed into the room in which Seward

was lying in bed, nursed by his young daughter and an attendant, and wounded the Secretary of State with a dagger, stabbing him twice in the neck, twice in the face. Major Seward, the older son, and a servant, tried to disarm the man. But he escaped. Andrew Johnson, the Vice-President, was also in Washington. In March, during his inauguration in the Senate, he had been drunk and had asserted in his speech that he was a plebeian and nothing but a plebeian. Andrew Johnson, the one-time tailor, was now President of the United States. Houses, shops, and stores were hung with black crape. Police patrols searched for the assassins on all roads and on all steamers plying the Potomac.

The person who had committed the outrages on Seward and his son was Lewis Payne and was arrested in the house of the Surratt family near Washington, as was Mrs. Surratt as an accomplice. Her son fled to Canada. Booth's mistress, Ella Turner, whose attempt at suicide failed, was also arrested. A search was made for two other conspirators whose participation was subsequently discovered—George Atzerott and David C. Harrold.

### III

An endless funeral cortege followed Lincoln's coffin on April 19. It was transported from Washington via New York, where the authorities exhibited the body, to Springfield, Illinois. On April 20 the police arrested Atzerott—on whose head the Secretary of War had placed a price of \$25,000—at the dairy farm of his uncle at Germantown, Maryland. On April 28 the violent death of Booth was reported. Together with Harrold, he had hidden himself in a marsh in St. Mary's County in Maryland. Colonel Baker, with his 1,800 horsemen and 500 secret policemen, ran him to earth there. A boy betrayed their hiding place. The two men fled to a barn on a farm belonging to one Garrett on the Rappahannock River near Port Royal and barricaded themselves. At 2 a.m., Baker, who stood outside with twenty-eight men of the cavalry, knocked on the barn door, and Booth demanded from inside: "Who are you, friend or foe? Are you Confederates? I have five men with me, and we can defend ourselves to the last." Baker replied: "I have fifty men with me, you are surrounded." Booth abused Harrold for being a coward and threatened the besiegers. With burning fag-

ots they set fire to the barn. Booth, who had fractured his left leg by his leap in Ford's Theater, shot at Sergeant Corbett. Corbett felled him with a bullet into his neck and backbone. The murderer lived for another three hours. He cursed the Northern states and sent his mother a message that he had died for his country. Harrold came out of the barn and allowed himself to be seized. Dr. Mudd, a Maryland physician who had supplied Booth with a pair of crutches, was arrested. The murderer was quietly buried, the location of his grave being kept secret.

President Johnson also placed the leaders of the Confederacy, headed by Jefferson Davis, who was kept a prisoner in the casemates of Fort Monroe, on trial as accomplices in the assassination of Lincoln. On May 8, the accused Harrold, Atzerott, Payne, Mrs. Surratt, Dr. Mudd, Spangler, Arnold, and O'Laughlin—the last four for being accessories—faced a military tribunal under Major General Hunter. Mudd was forty-two, thin, with spare, reddish hair. Harrold about nineteen, more boy than man, in a threadbare blue suit, with thick lips and dark eyes. Payne in shirt sleeves and an open collar, bony and broad-chested, with uncombed hair, a low forehead, and a glassy look. Spangler, the stage carpenter, stout and given to drink. Atzerott, pale, fair-haired, phlegmatic. Mrs. Surratt, veiled in deep mourning, fifty-one years old, intelligent, had her arms free, her legs being tied. Mudd only had light chains on his arms and legs. The long chains of the other male prisoners were weighted with fifty-pound balls. They had ten-inch iron bars between their legs and wore quilted cotton caps to prevent them from bashing their heads against the walls of their cells.

On July 7, Mrs. Surratt, Atzerott, Harrold, and Payne were hanged in Washington. Major General Hartranft read out the death sentence, which had been confirmed by the War Department. Clergymen prayed with the four prisoners. Their hands were tied behind their backs, their legs covered, and caps drawn over their eyes. Payne and Mrs. Surratt hardly moved a muscle at the gallows. Before the board under his feet was released, Atzerott cried out: "Good-by, gentlemen! Look out!" Mudd, Arnold, and O'Laughlin were condemned to life-long penitentiary. Spangler was given six years hard labor in the Albany Penitentiary.

### *Something Was Wrong*

Three patrons of the Metropolitan Opera's *Parsifal* last week obviously were not enjoying themselves. Puzzled and uncomfortable, they squirmed through the prelude, then established contact with an usher, who examined their ticket stubs and sent them away rejoicing to *Life with Father* at the Empire Theater across the street.

### *Big Difference*

Katherine Dunham, Negro ballerina, drew attention to the fact that in her *Tropical Revue* she wears a pearl in her navel instead of a diamond—because Gypsy Rose Lee had copied the diamond.